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ABSTRACT

A fieldwork procedure that enables students to design and conduct meaningful evaluation research in one semester is described. The procedure has been used in a 13-week program evaluation course in a master's program in community psychology and industrial/organizational psychology. About 2 months before the course begins, administrative units within the university are invited to submit requests for evaluation assistance. At the first class meeting, a list of potential evaluation projects are distributed to students. In most cases teams of two or three students get their first choice of projects. Before the third class meeting, student teams are to meet with their project sponsors to start negotiating the specifics of their evaluations. By the fifth class meeting, teams submit written evaluation plans to the course instructor and their project sponsors. Projects share at least four characteristics that have contributed to their success: they are client-driven, small-scale, regulated by strict deadlines, and campus-based. Outcomes for 10 sponsors who worked with student teams over 2 years are briefly discussed. (SW)

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Field Experiences in Evaluation Courses: Increasing Their Value to Students and Sponsors

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Field Experiences in Evaluation Courses: Increasing Their Value to Students and Sponsors

Previous authors have expressed doubts that students can design and conduct a meaningful piece of evaluation research in one semester. This paper describes and analyzes a fieldwork procedure that attempts to provide students with such an opportunity. Consumer satisfaction data from both students and project sponsors suggest that the procedure has been successful. Projects share at least four characteristics that have contributed to their success: They are client-driven, small-scale, regulated by strict deadlines, and campus-based. Limitations of the one-semester approach are discussed.

Field Experiences in Evaluation Courses: Increasing Their Value to Students and Sponsors

Incorporating meaningful field experiences into Program Evaluation (PE) courses is a continuing challenge for instructors (e.g., Brown 1985; Conner, 1986; Weeks, 1982; Wortman, Cordray, & Reis, 1980). The appealing scenario of a two-semester PE seminar accompanied by a year-long PE internship is simply not a viable option in many training programs for a variety of logistical reasons. A more typical situation is one in which a one-semester PE course involves a field-oriented project of some sort (e.g., Conner, 1986). For an instructor committed to providing students with an opportunity to design and conduct an evaluation from start to finish, the latter schedule imposes serious constraints. Moreover, producing evaluations that will actually be used by decision-makers--no easy feat under even the best of circumstances--becomes an especially intimidating task when the time frame encompasses just a single semester.

It is the more frequently encountered scenario that is the subject of this paper. What can an instructor do to maximize the quality of the student's hands-on learning experience in the one-semester course? And what are the implications of this analysis for how the clients of student evaluators in short-term projects might be better served? The framework I will use for addressing these issues is the campus-based field training component I have integrated into the master's-level PE course I regularly teach at a small, urban university.

Background and Structure of the Course

Most students who take PE at my institution are enrolled in a master's program in either community psychology or industrial/organizational psychology and have completed a graduate-level introductory course in research methods. Both full-and part-time students take the 13-week PE course, which meets once a week for three hours. From 12 to 15 students are usually enrolled.

Pre-Course Preparation

Approximately two months before the course begins I send a memorandum to a wide variety of administrative units within the university (e.g., academic departments, the alumni office, the counseling center), inviting them to submit requests for evaluation assistance. Since I cannot assume that all recipients of the memo are familiar with evaluation research, a brief description of the various types of evaluation is included.

I screen all requests for their general acceptability and make follow-up calls in response to all written submissions. (Some individuals simply phone in their requests.) Projects that would primarily consist of having students analyze pre-existing sets of data are usually judged to be unacceptable. In most cases these data sets have been "lying around" the department or division for some time with no action having been taken, a fairly reliable predictior of low commitment to the evaluation project on the part of the decision-makers involved. In addition, such projects do not provide students with an opportunity to develop and implement a data-collection strategy, an important evaluation task.

Most requests are for needs assessments or process evaluations, with a few asking for evaluations of program outcomes. Thus far there have been no proposals for cost-benefit or cost-effectiveness analyses. In view of the fact that I do not discuss cost-oriented evaluations until late in the PE course, a lack of requests in this area is probably all to the good.

1st Class Meeting

I distribute a list of potential evaluation projects to all students. In addition to the campus-based projects, there are typically one or two off-campus projects included on the list. These latter proposals are from settings that I have had contact with in a professional or volunteer capacity, and are generated through a much more informal process than the on-campus requests.

Before the 2nd Class Meeting

Students form teams of 2 or 3 and submit their project preferences to me. To avoid placing an undue burden on project sponsors, I ask students to refrain from contacting them during this period. Instead, I try to provide students with sufficiently detailed information in my written and oral project descriptions to enable them to make enlightened choices.

Employed students who do not wish to participate in one of the listed projects can satisfy the field requirement by doing a program evaluation where they work. Prior to the second class they must submit to me a brief description of what they plan to do. The criteria for judging the acceptability of these proposals are the same as those used for other projects.

2nd Class Meeting

Project assignments are announced. In most cases student teams get their first choice, and in no instance has a team ever been assigned to a project that was lower than its second choice.

Before the 3rd Class Meeting

Student teams are expected to meet with their project sponsors to begin negotiating the specifics of their evaluations. Because the teams only have one week in which to schedule and hold these meetings, I encourage sponsors to be as accommodating as possible when first contacted by the team.

3rd Class Meeting

Teams share with the rest of the class the results of their initial meetings with project sponsors. Problems and issues are brainstormed, and various action strategies are discussed.

By the 5th Class Meeting

Teams submit written evaluation plans to me and their project sponsors. These plans discuss in detail the focus and purpose of the evaluation, as well as the procedures to be followed in carrying it out (including a timetable). The resources required for the project are set forth, along with an analysis of any ethical issues raised by the project.

If the evaluation plan is submitted late the grade received by the team suffers significantly. This policy motivates teams to confront rather than avoid problems when designing the evaluation. Because of the shortness of a 13-week semester, procrastination in developing a plan can easily have fatal implications for the plan's implementation. Stringent time frames are a reality frequently encountered by practicing evaluators,

and students are almost certainly better off if they learn this fact sooner rather than later.

By the 12th Class Meeting

Teams submit final evaluation reports to me and the project sponsors. The format for the report can vary widely depending on the nature of the project. Once again, a significant grade penalty is assigned if the report is late.

Before the 13th Class Meeting

Teams are expected to meet with sponsors to review and discuss the final report. These meetings occasionally lead to one or two follow-up sessions after the course is over.

13th Class Meeting

Teams share with the rest of the class the results of their wrap-up meetings with project sponsors. The overall structure of the fieldwork component of the course is discussed and critiqued by the class as a whole, and recommendations for change are solicited. And the end of a very strenuous semester is celebrated with food and drink provided by both myself and the students.

Outcomes

Surveys of project sponsors after the close of the semester indicate that the perceived usefulness of the evaluations is very high. Indeed, all 10 sponsors who worked with student teams over the past two years of this course gave the highest rating possible (5) in answering the question: "Overall, how useful to you was the evaluation project?" (1=not useful at all, 5=very useful). Moreover, when sponsors were asked to estimate the im-

portance of the decisions that were actually affected by the evaluation an average rating of 4.4 out of a possible 5 resulted (1 = not important at all, 5 = very important).

High levels of sponsor satisfaction are also suggested by the significant growth in requests for evaluation assistance over the years, from an initial level of 5 or 6 per course to the current level of approximately 15. Given the relatively small size of the university in which the course is taught, a large part of this increase is undoubtedly due to word-of-mouth advertising that is positive in tone.

The overwhelming majority of students also appear to view the evaluation project in a very positive light, despite the very heavy workload which this component of the course imposes on them. For example, over the past two years they have responded with an average rating of 4.6 to the question: "How much do you feel you learned from doing the evaluation project? (1 = very little, 5 = a great deal, N = 28). Moreover, during the last class meeting of the semester students typically comment that they "couldn't imagine" the course being offered without the fieldwork component.

The high degree of satisfaction that most students display toward the project is probably largely due to the fact that the assignment embodies the characteristics of effective job design in a more general sense. That is, the tasks involved in the project are at least moderately high on the core dimensions of skill variety, autonomy, feedback, task identity, and task significance (Hackman & Oldham, 1980).

Discussion

The most important conclusion suggested by my experiences with one-semester evaluation projects is that careful (bordering on compulsive) planning on the part of the instructor can generate short-term field experiences that expose students to all the major stages of a program evaluation while influencing sponsors on important issues. Past discussions of evaluation field training have not usually been very sanguine about the possibility of achieving these objectives within such a brief time frame (e.g., Conner, 1986; Weeks, 1982; Wortman et al., 1980).

More specifically, there are four characteristics of the approach I have used which appear to have contributed to its success thus far: Projects are client-driven, small-scale, regulated by strict deadlines, and use on-campus settings. The significance of each of these aspects will be briefly discussed.

Client-Driven Projects

Potential clients are carefully screened by myself and student teams to ensure that the requested evaluations will generate information that has a high probability of actually being used by decision-makers. The overall approach taken closely resembles Patton's (1986) model of utilization-focused evaluation. For example, a great deal of attention in the second class session is devoted to the topic of incorporating a utilization-focused perspective into negotiating and contracting with sponsors. In this context it is important to remember that, except for the initial letter announcing the PE course, there is no attempt made on my part to actively recruit project

sponsors. This reduces the probability of make-work projects being submitted. Overall, then, the design of the course's fieldwork component maximizes the likelihood that the projects undertaken will involve sponsors of at least moderately high motivation who are engaging in evaluation for the "right" reasons.

Small-Scale Projects

Proposed evaluations that do not have a reasonable chance of being completed within the 13-week semester are rarely accepted. Student teams are cautioned to keep the semester's length very much in wind when negotiating with sponsors concerning the various components of their projects.

Small-scale evaluations need not, and should not, be superficial evaluations. Well designed, meaningful projects such as needs assessments and process evalutions can clearly be conducted in many campus settings in a semester. There are even opportunities to do certain types of outcome-oriented investigations (e.g., studies of the impact of remedial or probationary programs, evaluations of consumer satisfaction and decision-making). Generally speaking, I believe that students -- at least at the master's level--gain more from fully carrying out an evaluation of limited scope than from being involved in a subset of the phases associated with more ambitious projects.

Strict Adherence to Deadlines

The importance of this dimension has already been mentioned. While a realistic timetable is a key feature of virtually any successful evaluation, its role in a short-term project conducted by students is especially crucial. For one thing, there is simply very little time available to regroup after missing a deadline, with the result being that subsequent deadlines are often

missed in domino-like fashion. And if the semester happens to end before the project is completed, a variety of logistical factors typically come into play which can make it very difficult to finish the evaluation in a high-quality manner. Consequently, beginning with the very first class meeting I socialize students to take deadlines and timetables very seriously.

Campus-Based Projects

Emphasizing on-campus rather than off-campus evaluations has several major advantages. The pre-course phase of developing projects is generally less time-consuming for the instructor with on-campus projects. In almost every case I am at least moderately familiar with the department or office that requests assistance, in terms of both its activities and its formal and informal structure. This greatly expedites the process of evaluating the quality of proposed projects, and allows me to handle most issues over the phone.

I can also be more confident that, when I communicate to sponsors my expectations of them during the project, it will have more of an impact on their behavior than would be the case with most off-campus sponsors. This is because I frequently have direct or indirect working relationships with on-campus sponsors in a variety of contexts, and these relationships could be severely jeopardized if either of us failed to follow through on our promises concerning the evaluation. This influence is especially beneficial when it results in sponsors taking the evaluation-oriented requests of student teams more seriously than they otherwise might. In this fashion it increases the likelihood that the very tight timetables for the project will actually be met.

Campus-based projects facilitate the meeting of deadlines in another way as well. It is usually easier for student teams to handle the logistics of arranging meetings with on-campus sponsors than off-campus ones, in part due to the greater flexibility inherent in the work schedules of the former. Given the fact that many meetings between sponsors and teams are usually needed over the course of the project, the advantages of on-campus projects in this respect can have major consequences for the success of the evaluation.

The positive aspects of one-semester projects, whether they be on- or off-campus, should not cause us to overlook their limitations. For example, most outcome-oriented evaluations, as well as those involving cost-benefit or cost-effectiveness analysis, are simply not feasible within such a short time frame. This constraint contributes to a second limitation of one-semester evaluations: The methodologies they employ are usually not very high-powered in terms of their design or quantitative sophistication. Randomization and regression analysis are the stuff of course readings and classroom discussion, not fieldwork application in most cases. At another level, the campus-based nature of most projects restricts the types of issues that can be addressed by the evaluations. Many of the concerns typically encountered in evaluations of human services programs, for example, are unlikely to be faced by student teams in their on-campus projects.

These limitations, important as they are, appear to be more than compensated for by the benefits associated with one-semester, on-campus projects. Having the responsibility for carrying out an evaluation from start to finish is an extremely valuable learning experience, especially

for master's-level students who may be receiving no further graduate training in research methods or statistics. Consequently, instructors who teach in programs where year-long evaluation internships are not a realistic option have much to gain from giving serious consideration to the model of field training presented in this paper and how it might be adapted to fit their needs.

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